

# Study says age 11 and younger may be too soon to play tackle football

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Eastside Catholic quarterback Harley Kirsch (right) winces moments before being hit by Bellevue's Ryan Bowman (left) in the second half of the Class 3A high school football championship in Tacoma, Washington. Photo: AP Photo/Ted S. Warren

Getting bounced around in a game of football can harm the brain of a very young player. For that reason, some scientists think kids should wait until they turn 12 before they start playing tackle football.

A new study came out on Wednesday. It was a study of how playing football as a child affects your brain as a grown-up.

Scientists began by gathering 42 football players. They were between the ages of 41 and 65. They fell into two groups. Half of them started playing football before they were 12. The other half started when they were 12 or older. They all had played in the National Football League (NFL).

The players in the two groups were alike in almost every way. The only big difference between them was the age when they started playing football.

## **Memory Tests**

The players were then given a series of tests. To measure memory, scientists read the players a list of words. The players had to repeat the words back immediately, and then again 15 minutes later. Players were also tested on their problem-solving skills and verbal skills.

The players who had started playing football later in life did better on all three tests. The players who started playing football before the age of 12 did worse. The findings suggest that playing football harmed these players' brains.

Bob Stern was the main scientist behind the study. He said that the age of 12 was chosen as the dividing line because it is an important time for the brain.

He explained that the brain changes a lot in the years leading up to a child's 12th birthday. He and his fellow researchers wanted to see if playing football was particularly harmful during those years.

Many young kids play football. According to two other researchers, Christopher Filley and Charles Bernick, 7 out of 10 football players in the U.S. are younger than 14. Players between 9 and 12 bang their heads an average of 240 times in a single football season.

## **Study's Small Group**

Filley and Bernick praised the new study. But they said it had some problems. Studies like this one try to figure out what is going on by studying a "sample." There are too many people who played football as kids to test all of them. Instead, researchers test a few of them and look for patterns. They hope that these patterns are the same for everyone. It is possible, though, that the sample group will turn out to be different from most other people.

This study only tested 42 people. Maybe those 42 people were unusual in some way. Filley and Bernick suggested that a larger sample group would have provided more evidence.

Also, all of the people in the study were professional football players. They had all played in the NFL, where the best football players in the country play against each other. As a result, the players in the study may be different than the average person who plays football as a kid. What is true of professional players may not be true of everyone.

Stern agreed with Filley and Bernick. He admitted that the study was not perfect.

But, he said, if common sense tells parents that it's not a great idea to put a kid at risk of getting a head injury during an important time that the brain is developing, his study supports that. "Common sense may be right," he added.

